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School leaders meeting about funding issue

Coventry officials plan to attend today's gathering

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COVENTRY — Coventry's school district may not be able to sue the town for more money, according to School Committee Chairman Raymond E. Spear, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have some other ideas.

Coventry Superintendent Kenneth R. DiPietro and Spear will join a gathering of superintendents and school committee chairmen from across the state today to discuss the effects of the General Assembly's decision to level fund state education aid on their departments.

Last Saturday, Spear said, he attended a meeting of the Rhode Island Association of School Committee Members where several chairmen were talking about their plans of action as a result of state school aid being level funded.

Spear said some of the chairmen at the meeting said they had no choice but to consider the Caruolo Act — which allows a school department to go to court to seek more money from its community to fund mandated programs.

"I raised the point that I don't think the Caruolo is an appropriate way to go," Spear said. "I don't think that it will

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Raymond Spear
Coventry School Committee chairman

get anywhere and when we do things individually sometimes we don't accomplish as much as we should or could."

Spear said he made a suggestion to the chairmen that they all get together and see if the level funding of the state aid has had similar negative effects on the different municipalities. The chairmen agreed, he said, and will be meeting today.

"In the case of Coventry, we are going to be given, assuming a successful town financial meeting, the maximum we can get under the new 3050 legislation," Spear said. "Therefore, we can't claim that the town has underfunded our program because they funded us the maximum the law allows."

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Meeting to address school funding

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"The state is requiring us to pay \$600,000 toward pensions and, at the same time, they are cutting \$600,000 in state aid," he continued. "I think that is kind of interesting. The state is ordering us to give the \$600,000 and then refusing to give us the \$600,000 that the governor suggested that we get. On top of that, they have made a law that limits what we can get from our own community. The state in my opinion is the one responsible for creating an environment in which we are not adequately funded. So I suggested that maybe we make a class action suit. If we get a bunch of us together with the same problem and collectively do this, then maybe we can get somewhere."

Spear said he asked each chairman to bring his or her superintendent to the meeting and he does not know how many are attending. He also said the meeting would not necessarily end in a suit against the state but the intent of the

meeting is to get all the chairmen together so the state will listen.

Spear said, even if the state can't provide the communities with more education aid, there could be other ways it could help them. One example is by not requiring the municipalities to pay the extra pension money, he said.

"There are other districts that are in trouble," Spear said. "It is my intent to corral them and get them together and maybe we will decide we don't really want to sue the state, we just want to get together and make enough noise that will cause the state legislature to open their eyes and say 'What have we done?'"

"In my 27 years in this state, I have never seen a collective mindset of people who are trying to get the same job done," he said. "Sometimes, you just have to work together to get it done. I don't know where it will go but I feel this is a good shot at it because we don't need 15 to 20 districts doing the Caruolo Act. If legal action needs to be taken, let's do it together."